

A. KUPRIN

**THE MIRACLE
DOCTOR**

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Illustrated by G. MAZURIN
Translated by Eleanor Yankowskaya





The story that follows is a true story. Everything that I describe took place in Kiev some thirty years ago and to this day is cherished down to the smallest detail in the family that I will tell you about. I have only changed the names of some of the characters and set down this touching story in writing.

"Grisha! Hey, Grisha! Look at that! A little pig! And it's laughing! Yes, it is! And look what's in its mouth! Just look! Grass in its mouth! Honest to goodness! Imagine that!"

The two little boys standing before the huge plate glass window of the food shop shrieked with laughter, nudging each other with their elbows. At the same time they hopped about to warm their feet in the bitter cold. They had been standing for more than five minutes before the magnificent display, which excited both their minds and appetites. In the bright light of the hanging lamps there were mountains of choice red apples and oranges and perfect pyramids of tangerines, showing faintly golden through the tissue-paper wrappings. Huge smoked and pickled fish with bulging eyes and mouths open and twisted lay stretched out on platters. Below them juicy cut hams with thick layers of pink fat exhibited themselves in a wreath of sausages. Countless tins and boxes of salted, boiled and smoked snacks completed the appetizing scene, which made the two boys forget for a moment the frost of 12 degrees below and the important errand which their mother had sent them on, an errand that had ended so suddenly and so sadly.

The older boy was the first to tear himself away from the fascinating sight. He tugged at his brother's sleeve and said sternly, "Let's go, Volodya. Come on. No use standing here."

The boys stifled deep sighs (the older boy was only ten and neither had eaten anything since morning but watery cabbage soup) and, taking one last greedy look at the display of food, started off at a run down the street. At times they caught sight of a decorated fir tree through the steamed windows of some home, a tree that from a distance looked like a huge cluster of glittering



ФРУКТЫ



spots. At times they even heard the strains of a gay polka dance. But they bravely fought the temptation to stop for a few seconds and press their faces against the window glass.

As the boys went on, the streets became darker and more deserted. The handsome stores, the sparkling fir trees, the trotters speeding along under their red and blue net covers, the screech of sleigh runners, the holiday excitement of the crowds, the merry jumble of shouts and talk, the smiling faces of smartly-dressed ladies with cheeks pink from the frost were all left behind. Now there was nothing but empty lots, narrow, crooked streets, and dismal, unlit slopes. At last the boys reached an old, tumble-down house that stood apart from the others. Its slower part, actually a

basement, was made of bricks and the rest of the house, of logs.

They went through the small, icy and dirty yard that served as a rubbish dump for all the tenants of the house and, descending into the basement, went along a pitch-dark corridor and, feeling for their door, opened it.

The Mertsalovs had been living in this basement for more than a year. The two boys had long since grown accustomed to the sooty walls that oozed water, to the wet rags drying on a rope strung across the room, and to that terrible smell of kerosene smoke, dirty children's clothing, and rats that is the smell of poverty.





But today after all they had seen in the street, after the holiday excitement they had felt everywhere, their little hearts cried out with suffering beyond their years. A girl of about seven lay on a wide and dirty bed in a corner. Her face was flushed, her breathing quick and laboured, and her wide-open, feverish eyes had a fixed and unseeing look. In a cradle suspended from the ceiling next to the bed an infant cried incessantly. Its face puckered as it strained and choked. A tall, gaunt woman with a tired, emaciated face turned black from grief was on her knees beside the sick girl, adjusting the pillow and at the same time rocking the cradle with her elbow. As the boys entered the room, white billows of frosty air rushed in after them. The woman turned an anxious face.

"Well?" she asked impatiently.

The boys said nothing. Only Grisha wiped his nose loudly on the sleeve of his



coat, which had been made from an old quilted dressing gown.

“Did you deliver the letter? Grisha, I’m asking you. Did you give him the letter?”

“Yes,” said Grisha, his voice hoarse from the cold.

“Well, and then? What did you say to him?”

“I said everything you told me to. ‘Here,’ I said, ‘this is a letter from Mertsalov, your former steward.’ And he shouted at us, ‘Get out of here! You scum!’”

“Who? Who said that to you? Talk sense, Grisha.”

“The doorman. Who else? I said to him, ‘Take this letter and pass it on, and I’ll wait down here for an answer.’ And he said, ‘You bet! Think the Master has time to read your letters, don’t you?’”

“Well, and what did you say?”

“I said just what you told me to. I said, ‘We have nothing to eat. Our sister is sick... She’s dying.’ I said, ‘As soon as Father gets a position, he’ll find a way to thank you, Saveli Petrovich. He sure will.’ And just then a bell rang real loud, and he shouted, ‘Get out of here this minute! And don’t come around again!’ And he cuffed Volodya on the head.”

“Gave me one on the back of the head,” said Volodya, who had been following his brother’s story closely. And he rubbed the spot.

The older boy fumbled in the deep pockets of his shabby coat. He finally drew out a crumpled envelope and put it on the table, saying, “Here’s the letter.”

The mother asked no more questions. For a long time nothing was heard in the damp, stuffy room but the howling of the infant and the gasps of Mashutka, which sounded like a steady, monotonous groan. Suddenly the mother turned around and said,

“There’s soup left from dinner. Maybe you want to eat? Only it’s cold. There’s nothing to heat it on.”

Just then unsteady footsteps could be heard in the corridor and the sound of a hand groping for the door in the dark. The mother and the two boys turned toward the door, their faces white and tense with expectation.

Mertsalov entered. He was in a summer coat and a felt summer hat and wore no overshoes. His hands were blue and swollen from the cold. His eyes were sunken. His cheeks were drawn against the gums like those of a corpse. He said nothing to his wife, and she asked no questions. They understood each other from the despair they read in each other's eyes.

In that terrible, fatal year misfortunes had dogged Mertsalov and his family. First he himself had fallen ill with typhoid, and all their meagre savings had gone to help him recover. Then, when he got well, he learned that his position, the modest position of house steward for 25 rubles a month, had been given to another. There began a desperate, frenzied search for odd jobs, copying, any chance work. Family belongings were pawned and repawned. Everything saleable was sold. Then the children began to fall ill. One little girl had died three months before. Now another was in fever and unconscious. Elizaveta Ivanovna had to care for the sick child, breast-feed the infant, and tramp nearly to the other end of town, where she was hired to do the daily washing.

Mertsalov had spent that whole day trying desperately to scare up at least a few kopecks for medicine for Mashutka. He had made the rounds of nearly half the town, begging and pleading. Elizaveta Ivanovna had gone to the people for whom she did the washing. The children had been sent with a letter to the master of the house where Mertsalov had once been steward. But everybody found excuses. Either they were busy with holiday matters or they were short of money. Some, as



the doorman of Mertsalov's former master, simply drove the suppliants from the door.

For some ten minutes no one could say a word. Suddenly Mertsalov got up from the trunk on which he had been sitting and yanked his battered hat lower on his forehead.

"Where are you going?" Elizaveta Ivanovna asked anxiously.

Mertsalov, his hand on the door knob, turned.

"Sitting here won't help," he said hoarsely. "I'll go out again. May as well beg for alms."

Out in the street he walked aimlessly, looking for nothing and hoping for nothing. He had long since passed those agonizing days of poverty when he dreamed of finding a wallet with money in the street or suddenly getting an inheritance from an unknown distant relative. Now he felt an irresistible desire to get away, get away without one look back, anything but to see the silent despair of his starving family.

Should he beg? He had already tried it twice today. But the first time a gentleman in a racoon coat had lectured him that he should work, not beg, and the second time he had been warned that he would be taken to the police station.

Not noticing how it happened, Mertsalov found himself in the centre of the town, near the fence of a dense park. It had been an uphill walk and he was short of breath and tired. Without thinking he entered the gate and, going down a long walk of snow-covered linden trees, dropped down on a low park bench.

All was quiet and majestic. The trees in their white robes slept in motionless grandeur. At times a piece of snow would break loose from an upper branch, and it swished as it fell and caught on other branches. The profound silence and tranquillity that reigned in the park



suddenly awakened in Mertsalov's tortured soul an intolerable craving for the same tranquillity, the same silence.



"If only I could lie down and go to sleep," he thought, "and forget my wife and hungry children and sick Mashutka."

Mertsalov slipped his hand under his vest and fingered the thickish rope that served him as a belt. The thought of suicide clearly entered his mind. He did not shrink from it or for a moment shudder before the abyss of the unknown.

"Why die slowly? Isn't it better to choose a quicker way?"

Mertsalov was about to rise to carry out his terrible plan when the squeak of steps came to him clearly through the frosty air from the end of the walk. He turned angrily. Someone was coming toward him. At first he could see only the faint light of a cigarette, now brightening, now dimming. Then he gradually made out an elderly man, short in stature and wearing a warm hat, fur coat, and high galoshes. When the stranger reached the bench, he suddenly faced Mertsalov and, touching his hat in greeting, said,

“Do you mind if I sit down?”

Mertsalov turned away abruptly and moved to the far end of the bench. Neither spoke for about five minutes. The stranger smoked his cigar and studied Mertsalov out of the corner of his eye. Mertsalov sensed this.

“What a wonderful evening!” The stranger spoke suddenly, “Frosty and... quiet. How lovely the Russian winter is!”

His voice was soft, gentle, and old. Mertsalov did not turn and said nothing.

“I bought gifts for some children I know,” the stranger continued. He had several bundles in his hands. “But I couldn’t resist going out of my way to pass through the park. It is so nice here.”

By nature Mertsalov was shy and gentle, but at these words of the stranger he was overcome by a rush of desperate anger. He swung around to face the old man and, waving his arms frantically, shouted in a choking voice:

“Gifts! Gifts! Gifts for some children you know! And I... in my home, Sir, my children are dying of starvation. Gifts! My wife has no milk, and the baby hasn’t eaten all day. Gifts!”

Mertsalov expected that after these confused, angry

shouts the elderly gentleman would rise and leave. But he was mistaken. The stranger moved closer his intelligent, serious face with the gray side-whiskers and said in a friendly but serious tone:

"Wait! Don't get excited! Tell me everything from the beginning and as briefly as possible. Perhaps the two of us can think of a solution."

There was something so soothing, so trust-inspiring in the unusual face of the stranger that Mertsalov poured out the whole story in great haste and agitation, concealing nothing. He told about his sickness, the loss



of his position, the death of a child, and all his other misfortunes right up to the present. The stranger listened without interrupting, only peering ever deeper into Mertsalov's eyes as if wishing to penetrate the very depths of the man's grief-stricken and enraged soul. Suddenly he leaped up in a quick, strangely youthful movement and gripped Mertsalov by the arm. Involuntarily Mertsalov stood up.

"Let's go," cried the stranger, pulling Mertsalov. "Quick! It's your good fortune that you met a doctor. I cannot promise anything, of course, but... Let's be off!"

Some ten minutes later Mertsalov and the doctor entered the basement. Elizaveta Ivanovna was lying on the bed beside her sick daughter, her face buried in the dirty, greasy pillows. The boys were sitting in the same place, eating soup and crying into the fire-blackened pot, frightened by the long absence of their father and the motionless figure of their mother. With dirty fists they rubbed their tears about their faces. The doctor threw off his coat as he entered the room and, remaining in an old-fashioned and rather worn jacket, went up to Elizaveta Ivanovna. She did not raise her head at his approach.

"Now, now, my dear," said the doctor, patting her on the shoulder. "You get up and show me your sick child."

The same tenderness and persuasion in the doctor's voice that had affected Mertsalov in the park now prompted Elizaveta Ivanovna to rise at once and carry out all his orders. A few minutes later Grisha was making a fire in the stove with the wood the miracle doctor had sent to the neighbours for, Volodya was blowing hard into the samovar to start it up, and Elizaveta Ivanovna was wrapping Mashutka in a warm compress.



Soon after Mertsalov appeared. With the three rubles which the doctor had given him he had already managed to buy tea, sugar, and rolls and get some hot food at a nearby inn. The doctor sat down at the table and wrote something on a piece of paper that he tore from a notebook. This done, he made a kind of scrawl at the bottom instead of signing his name, stood up and, covering the note with a saucer, said,

"Take this note to the chemist's. A teaspoonful every two hours. That will make the little one cough up phlegm. Continue to apply a warm compress. In addition, call Dr. Afrosimov tomorrow even if your daughter is better. Dr. Afrosimov is a good physician and a fine person. I'll talk to him at once. And now farewell, my dears. May the coming year be a little more merciful to you than this one has been! And, most important, never lose heart."

The doctor shook the





hands of Mertsalov and Elizaveta Ivanovna, who had not yet recovered from their amazement, and patted the cheek of Volodya, who stared with open mouth. Then he thrust his feet into the high galoshes and put on his coat.



Mertsalov came to his senses only when the doctor was already in the corridor. He rushed after him but unable to see anything in the dark shouted, "Doctor, Doctor, wait! Tell me your name, Doctor. So that my children at least can pray for you."

Mertsalov felt around with his hands, trying to catch the invisible doctor. But just then the calm, aged voice

came from the far end of the corridor: "Oh, what nonsense! Return home at once."

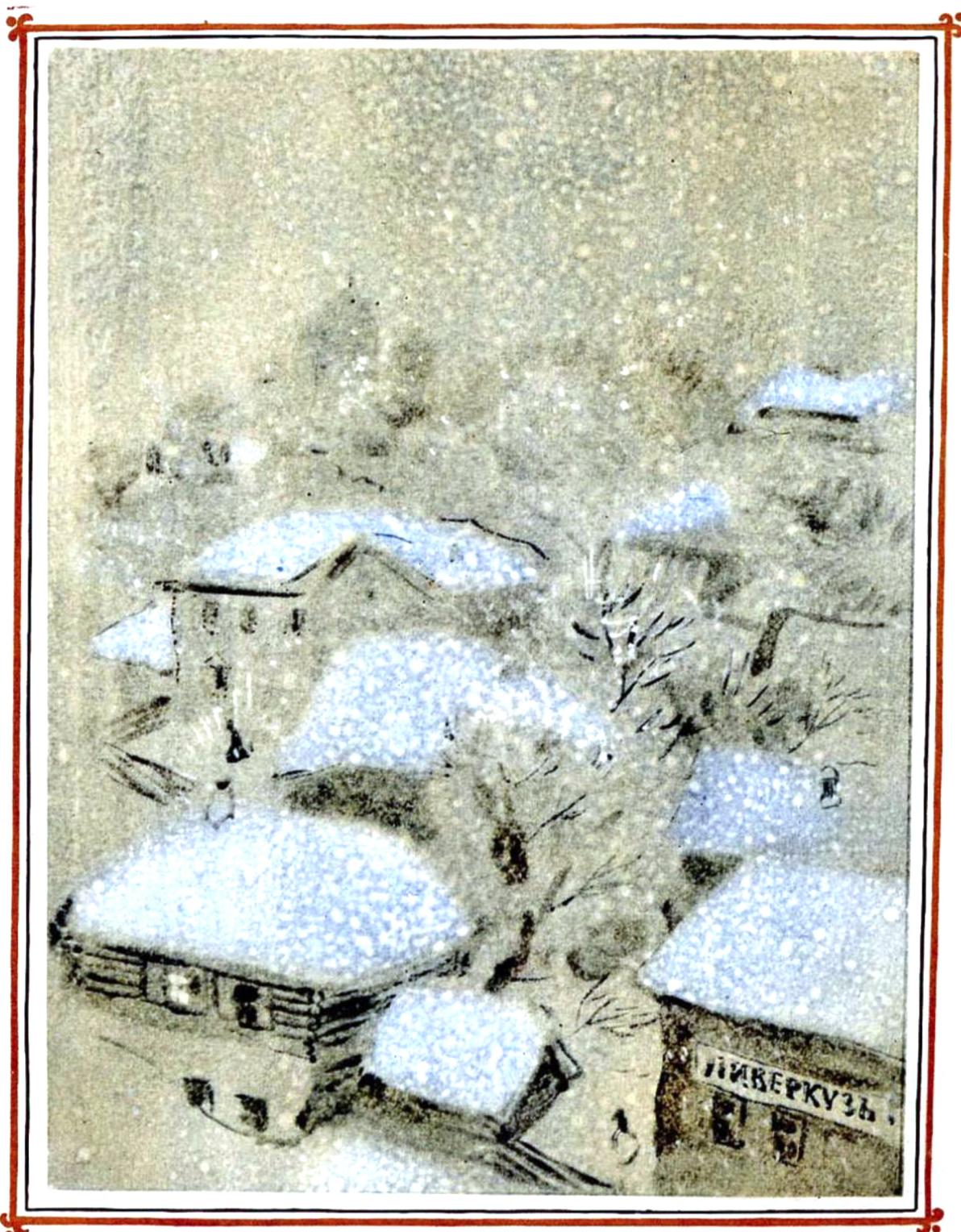
When Mertsalov returned, a surprise awaited him. There under the saucer along with the miracle doctor's prescription lay several large banknotes.

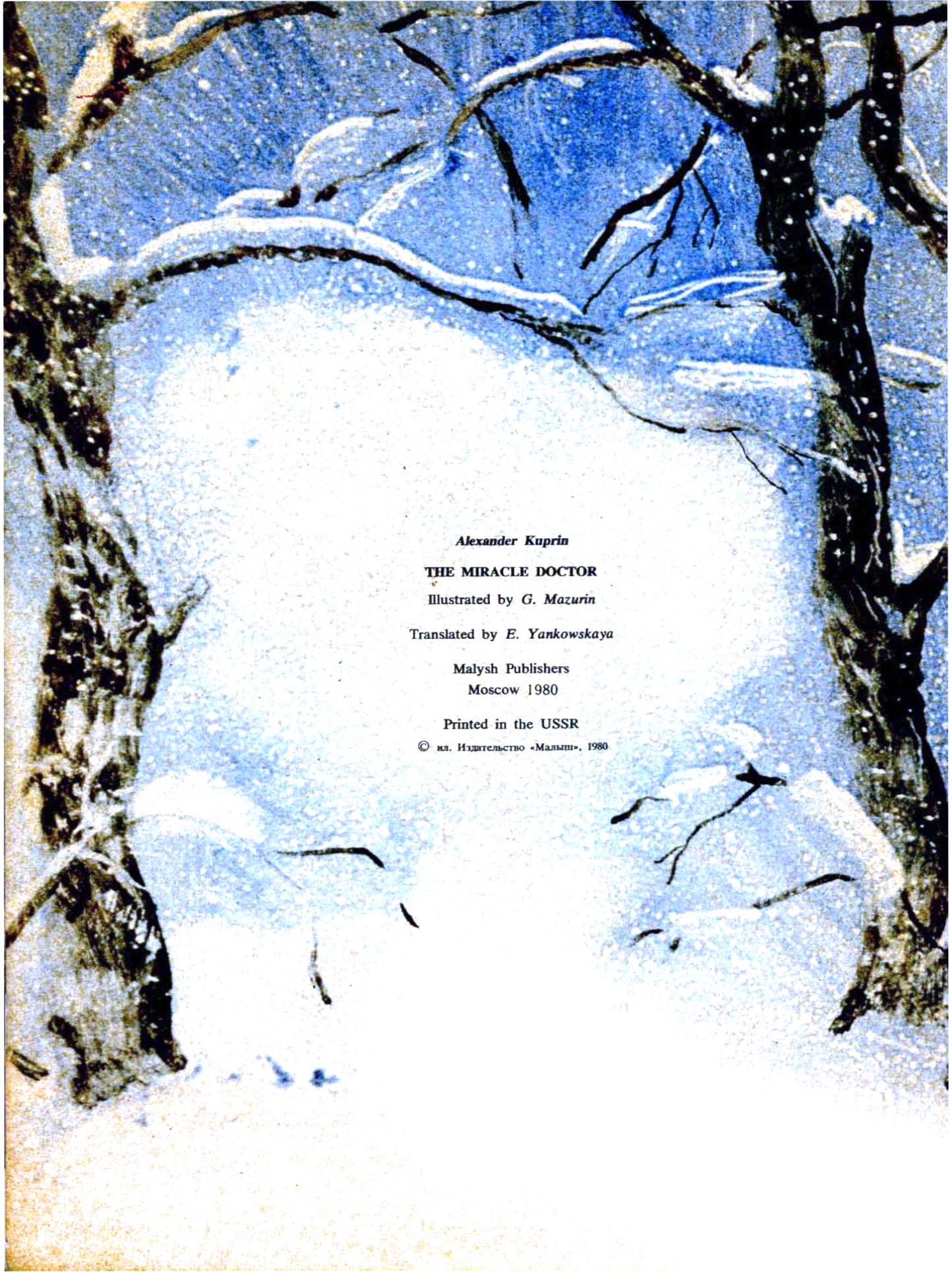
That evening Mertsalov learned the name of his unexpected benefactor. The chemist had written clearly on the label attached to the bottle of medicine: "Prescription of Professor Pirogov."

I heard this story, and many times over, from Grigori Mertsalov, that same Grisha who on the Christmas Eve that I have described shed bitter tears into the fire-blackened pot of thin soup. Today he holds a rather responsible position in a bank and is known for his honesty and his kindness towards the poor. Every time that he concludes his story about the miracle doctor he adds in a voice trembling with emotion:



"After that it was as though an angel of mercy had taken charge of our family. Everything changed. At the beginning of January Father found a position, Mother began to feel well, and my brother and I were fixed up in a secondary school at government expense. That saint of a man worked a miracle. But we saw our miracle doctor only once after that, when his body was being taken to his estate of Vishnya. And it was not he that we saw, because that spark of greatness and holiness that burned in the miracle doctor during his lifetime had gone out forever."





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